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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: STAFFDEL SHANK'S VISIT TO GUATEMALA

1. Sensitive But Unclassified - entire text.

2. Summary: Staffdel Shank's three-day visit to Guatemala gave the Congressional visitors an updated picture of the Guatemalan reality, through meetings with key GOG and private sector interlocutors. The GOG representatives emphasized the Berger Administration's accomplishments in the areas of military downsizing/modernization, anti-corruption, and tax reform. Human rights activists were less positive about changes in the Guatemala military but conceded the goodwill of the Berger Administration. Site visits to an Air Force base, a high-crime area, and a police station gave the visitors a first-hand look at the lack of resources that constrain Guatemalan counternarcotics and public security programs. The message about resource constraints was reinforced in an Embassy briefing on counternarcotics/alien smuggling and in a meeting with the Guatemalan Minister of Government. End Summary.

3. House Appropriations Committee, Foreign Operations Subcommittee (HACFO) Majority Clerk John Shank, HACFO Minority Staffer Mark Murray, and H Legislative Management Officer Steve Marchese visited Guatemala on August 10-12 to review U.S. assistance programs and meet with Guatemalan government and private sector representatives. Staffdel Shank's program included a Country Team briefing, reception with civil and private Sector figures, respective meetings with the Guatemalan Vice President (which featured a 10 minute conversation with President Berger), Minister of Defense, and Minister of Government (Interior), and lunch with human rights activists. Meetings with the Guatemalan Transparency Coalition and Congressional leadership ) along with in-house briefings on AID, counternarcotics and trafficking programs - rounded out the Staffdel program.

4. Following a meeting with the Embassy Country Team, the Staffdel traveled to the Presidential Palace, where Vice President Stein told the staffers that military downsizing was complete. Repeating points made by Ambassador Hamilton in the Country Team meeting, the Vice President noted that: a) the reduction of the military budget to .033 percent of GDP was twice the .066 figure stipulated in the peace accords; the size of the military had been reduced by 66 percent since 1997 ) twice the 33 percent reduction mandated by the peace accords; and that the new military doctrine had been developed through a process that included widespread and in-depth consultations with the Guatemalan civil sector. Stein also mentioned efforts to investigate military corruption and promote transparency, citing as an example the Attorney General's sequestration of all military accounting records from the past four years.

5. In discussing assistance for the military, the Vice President was enthusiastic about the possibilities of taking advantage of the Excess Defense Article (EDA) program and told the staffers that Guatemala intended to seek access to EDA. He also made a heartfelt pitch for release of old MAP funds. Stein reiterated that the GOG was committed to CICIACS (the international commission to investigate clandestine groups) and was optimistic about gaining UN support for a redrafted agreement, although he was less confident about Congressional prospects. At the end of the meeting, Stein led the meeting participants in brief drop by on President Berger, who was extremely cordial.

6. In their first meeting on Day 2 of the visit, the staffers traveled to Aurora International Airport for a briefing by the Defense Minister and walk-through inspection of military aviation assets. Defense Minister General Mendez began with a presentation that detailed the downsizing of the armed forces over the past seven years, including tables of personnel strengths, and maps of unit deployments, during this time frame. Mendez also explained how the Guatemalan military had shifted from a territorial deployment structure (consisting of military regions and detachments that covered the entire country) to one based on a functional structure (of regional infantry brigades with a pending rapid deployment capability). After describing ongoing reforms in military administration and the military personnel system, General Mendez noted the various measures taken by the military, and the Guatemalan government in general, to assist demobilized personnel, and stated that the demobilization had been voluntary (i.e. with sufficient candidates to avoid the need for involuntary separations).

17. Air Force Commander General Santamarina led the visitors on an inspection of Guatemalan Air Force assets, including UH-1 helicopters, A-37 attack aircraft, and turboprop C-47 and King Air transport aircraft. The staffers learned that all A-37s were grounded due to damaged (crystallized) windscreens. Almost all of the helicopters, and the majority of the remaining aircraft, were also grounded. General Santamarina presented several anecdotes that described how resource constraints hindered military effectiveness in supporting counternarcotics police units.

18. The staffers, second site visit occurred in Villa Nueva, a poor, gang and crime-infested neighborhood in the northern part of the capital, and the location of an AID-funded justice center and a NAS-funded police investigators center. The staffers toured a local police precinct station, obtaining a first-hand look at the dismal state of police readiness and equipment given the size of the community.

19. A lunch with several prominent human rights activists (including Helen Mack) focused on issues of importance for the activists, namely transparency in the military budget, the need for long-term planning with respect to military downsizing and justice sector reform, the need for substantive government action on human rights cases, and the need for land reform to address inequalities in wealth distribution. Mario Polanco of the Mutual Support Group (GAM) revealed that the military had turned over thousands of documents from the files of the dismantled Estado Mayor Presidencial. The PDH had in turn sought staff support for the GAM to photocopy the files. This work had been going on for seven months and hundreds of thousands of pages had been photocopied so far, Polanco said, but no analytical work on the documents had yet been conducted.

10. CICIACS was one of the principal themes in the meeting with Transparency Commissioner Fuentes and other representatives from the Transparency Coalition. In the wake of the Constitutional Court decision that struck down several of its key provisions, Fuentes announced that the GOG planned to analyze the agreement and then negotiate with the UN to reach agreement on an acceptable substitute. Transparency Commission representatives then discussed the roles of their various organizations, and Fuentes explained that the Supreme Court received a large number of anonymous reports about misconduct by members of the government. All of the reports were investigated, Fuentes said. Of these, he claimed that 70 percent were verified and 30 percent were found to be groundless.

11. Newly-appointed Minister of Government Vielmann gave the visitors a discourse on the problems of the police and justice sector, much of the blame for which he laid on the previous government. Vielmann sketched out several goals, most notably improvement of the Police Academy curriculum and training as part of a general enhancement of police professionalism, strengthening of the administrative capacity of the police, and fighting corruption within the ranks of the police. The Minister averred that Guatemala faced serious threats from organized crime, drug trafficking, international terrorism, and other forms of transnational crime. He wanted to avoid a "Colombianization" of Guatemala, pledged to work closely with the Embassy in combating drug and people trafficking, and welcomed any possible assistance from the U.S. Government.

12. During an informal dinner at the DCM's residence, law enforcement and military members of the Country Team described Guatemalan counternarcotics and anti-trafficking efforts, with emphasis on the cooperation of GOG authorities in repatriation of third country illegal aliens intercepted on the high seas. The staffers were also briefed on the nature of drug transits through Guatemala, a phenomenon that has left graveyards of wrecked and abandoned smuggling aircraft throughout the Peten region. Country Team members also informed the staffers about the extensive maritime alien smuggling pipeline from Ecuador to Guatemala and highlighted Embassy concerns about the vulnerability to exploitation of this and other channels by Special Interest Aliens.

13. At a breakfast with congressional leadership hosted by the Ambassador, staffers heard concerns from the left (ANN congresswoman Nineth Montenegro) and the right (FRG congressman Antonio Arenales) about how Guatemala could best deal with its crime problem. Congressional leader Jorge Mendez (GANA party) spoke about how inexperienced and divided the Congress was and how difficult that made passage of important legislation. National Defense Committee Chairman Armando Paniagua spoke about the pressing need to improve Guatemala's capabilities to act against international crime, including drug traffickers and alien smugglers.

14. The Staffdel did not have the opportunity to see this report before departing Guatemala.

